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THE
PERFUME HOLDER

A PERSIAN LOVE POEM
BY CRAVEN LANGSTROTH

BETTS       

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SECOND EDITION

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TO
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON.

This poem is derived from a prose story, called "Selim, the Unsociable," by Arthur Kennedy and originally published in Temple Bar.

C. L. B.



THE PERFUME-HOLDER



PROUD Naishàpùr, two hundred years ago,
Inviolatè from the galling Turkish foe,
Like a warm opal dropped from Allah's hand,
Lay glimmering on the green Khorassan land.
Girdling the South, the desert's sandy coil
Strangled the verdure and oppressed the soil;
But East and North the languorous noon-day breeze
Lifted the leaves of lime and tamarind trees
Over the hills, within whose broken row
The gleaming city watched the river flow.
Along the camel track from Ispahan,
Came tinklings of the nearing caravan,
Trailing its parched, dust-cumbered passage down
Into the market of the wealthy town.

Piercing the vibrant ether, bold to view,
A hundred minarets burned athwart the blue;
The purple roofs of mosques, like sunset isles,
Blazed all their panoply of porcelain tiles,
While from the walls the names of Allah shone
In many a scrolled and squared device of stone.
Color and light loomed everywhere; their glow
Burnished the booths and houses, row on row :
They flamed across the palace court-yard flags
And blazoned even the cringing beggar's rags.
The darkling ponds and fountains steely-cold
The sun's keen alchemy changed to shimmering gold;
And marble cupolas and awnings white
Flashed forth all splendid with reflected light;
While green pomegranate leaf and pregnant vine
Gained prouder lustre from the teeming shine.
All earth was bathed in palpitating heat;
The sun-rays searched enclosure, lane, and street,
And streamed along the cream-white painted walls
Of gardens and the roofs of market stalls,
Spreading one glare of yellow radiance down
O'er hill and valley, desert, wood, and town.



HIGH noon in Naishàpùr!—the gay bazaars,

Heaped with their wares wrought under half
the stars,

One ant-like, huge, conglomerate market made,

Coursed with a hundred throbbing veins of trade.

Yet the loud buzz of traffic even there

Sinks at the high Muezzin's call to prayer,

While so oppressive grows the blaze of day

That even the water carriers shirk the way.

A little longer swirls the busy bruit

About the coffee stalls and booths of fruit ;

A moment longer does the merchant stop,

Claps-to the slender shutters of his shop,

Then in his flapping slippers homeward hies

To prayer, to pipe, to Fatima's dark eyes.

In the brass-worker's noisy, bright bazaar

Hushed are the chaffering and the hammer's jar,

And silence settling o'er earth's fevered face,

Soothes for an hour the throbbing market-place.



ONE man, a poor artificer in brass,

Stirs not as forth the hurrying vendors pass ;

But soon as quiet breathes along the street,

Springs from his leathern cushion to his feet,

Lays by the lantern he had shaped that day,
Looks out along the cleared, deserted way,
Takes down the bowl of curds and loaf of bread
That stand upon the shelf above his head,
Hooks up a curtain o'er his small retreat
Which opens full upon the busy street,
Casts one more glance along the farther wall,
Then hides himself behind the portal-shawl.



NE might have heard within that curtain soon
A tapping through the hot and quiet noon :
A strange man this—mayhap for love of gain
He works mid-day when all for rest are fain?
Such was his custom, and the passers by
Had ceased to scan him with a curious eye.
The gossips had no tale of him to tell ;
They named him Selim the Unsociable.
Too poor for note of even the idlest there
Was he, and why he spent the hour of prayer
Behind his curtain, save for rest and shade,
None knew or cared ; few were that sought his trade.
'Twould seem such anxious privacy and heed
Had little use ; the street was bare, indeed,
Save vagrant dogs that strewed the shining track,


Like pious Moslems sleeping in a pack,
Snarling in dream, because the heated bricks
In poignant fancy smote them like the kicks
Of Allah's Faithful—snapping jaws in pain
Then stretching out their quivering legs again.




HO treads with silent pace the empty street,
Then halts and hearkens to that hammer's
beat?

Well might you mark him by his furtive eye
A friend to Falsehood, grasping, shrewd and sly.
To Selim's booth he moves, he makes a stand,
The curtain raises with a stealthy hand
And peers within; the sudden shaft of light
Flashes a marvelous work upon his sight;
For lo, between the craftsman's bended knees,
Prouder than aught that Shah or Sultan sees,
With lines of purest arabesque encrolled,
A perfume-holder, rich as burnished gold,
Wrought all in brass, cut round with lace designs,
With mottoes graved between the flowing lines;
Of antique mould the base; superbly fair
The swelling bowl; and like a lily in air
The stem rose curving; and its feet were wrought

With cunning art from Indian carvers caught.
A miracle of rare and patient art,
Informed by genius ripening from the heart,
Such as might lift the incense at the shrine
Of Allah or of Mahomet the Divine.
One might forego all sense save that of sight,
The life-long master of that heart's delight.

OU in the cloud-spanned, amethystine West,
Know not what ceremonious, prideful zest
The Persian in his mistless, azure air,
Brings to his perfume even as 'twere his prayer.
The perfume-holder, no effeminate whim,
Holds ever first and honored place with him;
Drop on the powder but some glowing coals,
Lo, from its bowl the spiralled perfume rolls;
Dear unto Allah as the mingled breath
Of lovers passing through the gates of death.

O lie awake in one bliss-haunted dream
Where leaves are rustling and cool fountains
gleam,
Within a vine-hung, lustrous colonnade,
While near, some large-eyed, love-enchanted maid

Leans, lily-crowned, against a marble jar,
Caressing languidly her light guitar,
Her fingers glancing o'er the shimmering strings
Like play of moonbeams on deep bubbling springs,
Wooing the soul of melody divine
From murmuring streams and groves of haunted pine,
Her bosom lifting to the waves of sound
That have in one delicious languor drowned
The outer sense, leaving the spirit free
To revel in one swoon-like ecstasy—
And then to watch the pungent vapor curl
With many a slender and fantastic swirl
Swung through the vibrant music, till the air
Freighted with tinkling sounds and odors rare
Filters soul-deep within the fleshly mail,
Till, rapt, escaping from the body's jail,
The spirit issuing through its portal flies
To fairy realms of wonder and surmise—
Such were indeed a taste of Paradise!



MALL thought of this had he, that sordid spy,
Who on the masterpiece cast curious eye.
He was a merchant, trained to every guile
Of trade,—to fawn, to browbeat, and to smile;

Careful to hold, in every scheme he tried
Of fraud or rapine, law upon his side.
His talon fingers in their crawling clutch
Pulled forth the shadowing curtain overmuch,
And Selim, of his presence made aware,
Looked up and met the intruder's searching stare,
And frowning, marked the sordid ruthless trace
Of avarice on the man's ill-omened face.
Then spoke the stranger with a smile compressed,—
"Selim, has Allah made the time of rest
Too long, or given too brief a working day,
That thus you toil the noontide hour away?"
As some proud courser that with action grand
Tosses aside a strange caressing hand,
So Selim threw his head back at the word,
For hateful to him was the voice he heard,
And answered: "Surely little rest doth lie
With him, O merchant, who with delving eye
Looks either in broad noon or yet at night
On that which others fain would keep from sight.
It naught concerns my business to attest
Wherefore I work at mid-day or I rest."



HE set aside the wonder-work of art
And waited for the questioner to depart,
Whose sidelong, hovering glance was cast about
Nor rested but to mark the vessel out.

He named a price, but Selim shook his head;
"Why squander words? 'Tis not for sale," he said.
The other, following his practiced guile,
Answered with fawning, unbelieving smile:
"I have a friend, named Marco, from the North,
Dealer in finished brass, who ventures forth
From Venice even to the farthest East;
He'd give the price of many a lordly feast
For such a thing as this, would'st thou but sell?"
But Selim no persuasion might compel
To barter; wrathful to be thus addressed,
He locked his treasure in a cedar chest,
Then to the merchant lifted, one by one,
The simpler works of brass that he had done,—
They were but few,—till forth the chafferer went
And left him with his solitude content.



BUT he, the stranger, when he passed from sight
Of Selim's booth, his face set hard and white,
Halted, with fingers clenched and frowning
brow,

And pondered deep, as one who frames a vow.
The swart Egyptian boy who lounged before
A rich brass-dealer's widely-swinging door
Watched with a keen and curious surmise
The wicked purpose in the crafty eyes,
For every gesture, every glance betrayed
The heart of greed whose hand would not be stayed.




STRIDENT voice came, calling from afar
The hour of work; at once the clattering jar
Of hammers rose again athwart the air,
The seething throng poured back into the fair,
And through its alleys swirled the babbling flood,
Like buzzing bees a-swarm within a wood.
But Selim, through his resting hour intent
And keenly active, languid now, was bent
Above the brass-work, as though toil were grown
Distasteful to him since the noon had flown.
His hammer strokes, less eager, blow by blow,
Dropped on the brass, grew slower, still more slow,
And oft he clasped his brow and closed his eyes,
Bruised by the coarse discordant market cries;
Then with a start, as if in self-disdain,
Caught up the unfinished lantern once again.

IT was a hot and glaring afternoon;
Through the bazaar the hum like a bassoon
Surged constant; presently a clamorous throng
Came, booming with the beat of drum and gong,
While, blaring fitfully, the snorting blast
Of trumpets on the scorching air was cast.
The gathering scuff of many slippered feet
Came now low-looming down the dusty street.
The loiterers left the shadow of the walls,
Lured by the shouts and boisterous trumpet-calls.
The hammer-smiths and chafferers paused as dashed
The flaunting pageant forth and by them flashed.
'The last Shah's eldest son, 'twas bruited wide,
Was riding to the mosque to pledge his bride;—
Next to the Shah, the first of Persian land,
And named *The-Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand*.
A royal graft on humble stock whose sword
Some daring day might make him Iran's lord.

BUT Selimi, hooded in one changeless thought,
Scarce heard the tattle that the gossips brought.
None sought to cross an easy word with him;
They deemed his silence but a surly whim.
He, caring little what was thought or said,

So that they left him quiet, with bowed head,
Blind to all else, held survey in his mind
One memory with his inmost soul entwined.
The incompleted lantern he let lie;
The words of rumor as they floated by
Blent with his dream: "The flower of Iran's land
Is his beloved." He sighed, looked at his hand,
Then from his finger, slowly and in pain,
Unwrapped a narrow linen. He was fain
To draw still further backward from the sting
Of passing eyes. A tiny hammered thing
Of brass, close-twisted to a biting ring,
Around his finger showed, whose tissue, red,
Twinged to the pressure of the figured shred.
He wet the cloth, replaced it, while a chime
Of thoughts went swinging backward to the time
When she, pale lily of his heart, had stept
Across the doorway where his goods were kept,
And in a playful, blithely-mocking vein,
Had given him this circled pledge of pain.
Ay, he remembered, how upon that morn
He felt—all wonder, joy—his soul was born!
How he had gazed upon her laughing eyes
As at a Peri wafted from the skies,
Fairer than houri to the bosom pressed

Of Mahomet in the regions of the Blest.
Except those eyes, each glittering like a star,
Her face was veiled, as in the white cymar
She glided through the market; oft by chance
Caught the obeisance and adoring glance
Of Selim, sitting laboring in his booth;
And as she viewed the trembling rose of youth
Throw signal on his cheek, she smiled, again
Returned him salutation; now and then
Loitered some moments at his little stall,
And then with innocent art by letting fall
some corner of her veil, in hide-and-seek,
Revealed the sweet curved vision of her cheek
Of ripening olive, like the moon in mist,
And rose-red lips half parting to be kissed.

NE day—one of those few thrice happy days
That star perchance a lifetime—his amaze
Burning his face, and hope still hopeless all,
Rallying his heart to Love's unreasoning call—
She came to visit Selim and to buy
Some trinkets of his patient industry.
Lingering she stayed an hour; she bade him tell
The way he wrought the brass; with playful spell

Now drew from him the use of lead and pitch;
Then took the die and punch and bade him teach
Her hand to cut the ductile metal through;
One little die she held, 'twas virgin new;
A tink whorl the pattern was; she tried
To punch a strip of brass, while he, to hide
Her slender fingers from an errant blow,
Shielded them with his ampler hand, and so
As once the stroke she missed and still again,
Still he rejoiced for her he suffered pain.
At length she gave him back the die; he swore
With words of fire, no one should use it more
Except himself, nor he but on some gift
For her; then she, her laughing eyes uplift
To Selim's face, and with a doubting air
Mocking his earnestness, yet told him where
A kinsman dwelt, whose hand would duly take
The present he might fashion for her sake.
Then did her mood to childlike humor pass;
Again she took a tiny shred of brass
And twisting it with pincers in a ring
Round Selim's finger tightly, tried to bring
Mischievously, across the strong man's face
A twinge of pain, and smiling left the place.



AND Selim, never from that hour at rest,
Had shrined her lovely image in his breast;
A few more times she passed his open door
Seeking the market, but she smiled no more
Upon him, though his eyes with hunger sued;
That one brief meeting never was renewed.



NOW his roused purpose to one issue ran:
Upon that day he straight for her began
A perfume-holder, lavishing his fond heart
Upon it; for it eased him of his smart
To feel he wrought her service, and to see
Its beauty heightening, as some stately tree
Spreads in the desert, when with the patterned whorl
He would its richly shining face impearl
With tiny insets glimmering to the view,
Fashioned to let the writhing vapor through.
One name for her he had and only one:
At each moon-end, his task more nearly done,
He muttered as with care he placed apart
The gift, "'Tis for The Star-of-Selim's Heart;"
The star that touched the wan, the lonely sky
Of his rapt spirit, and then passed him by.

AND now 'twas finished—every tiny scroll
Wrought perfect; but the work in Selim's soul
Was never finished, but incessant beat
Upon his heart, while through the mid-day heat
The hammers with their clinking, changeless chime,
Dinned out their symphonies to unresting Time.

HE took the cunning tool, the delicate die
That formed the whorl, and with a gloomy eye
Defaced its pattern with his file and cast
The steel, disfeatured, on the street, then passed
One hand across his brow to smoothe its pain,
And took the unfinished lantern up again.

EVEN as he worked a warm Elysian dream
Closed o'er him like a sunset, gleam on gleam.
Upon the wings of passion forth he flew
To clasp her where, unknown to her, in view
Of fancy he had held her;—next the note
Of vision changed; he saw her vestments float
Snow-white through flower-strewn ways, and on her face
A pleading look, as one who asks for grace;
For she was now the seeker, and he—where?
He knew not, cared not, nor could seem to care;

But down the eddying current of his swoond
A veiled form came that told him "I have found
My perfume-holder;" straightway he was made
The perfume-holder; smiling then she laid
Caressing hands upon it, and did speak
It fair, and pressed it to her velvet cheek,
And, like to Allah's blessing, letting fall
Her silk of hair around in shining pall;
And over all—the night without a frown,
And the white moon and stars were shining down.
Then for one moment, through the hammered brass
He felt his soul, the soul of Selim, pass
And tremble to the magic of her touch.
The moment sped; there fell low voices, such
As Allah sends to true believers, when
He whispers of the crooked ways of men,
That called, "O Selim! Where is Selim?" Soon
A sweet known voice made answer like a tune,
"I will find Selim, for I know him by
The ache within his finger"; then the sky
Sank, burdened with the sorrow and the pain
Of blighted souls that on sad earth remain;
So, forth went that fair form that held the voice
Among them, seeking, till she found her choice,
Selim's all-constant pain: with that began

By the dream-power the building of a man
Like Selim, yet unlike; the half-things fell
And crumbled in the falling; but the spell
Kept on till, lo, the finish—head to feet!
Then for some moments Selim was complete.
Sitting in the bazaar, his right hand laid
Across his hammer, and the lantern stayed
Between his knees; but nowhere now was seen
The Star-of-Selim's-Heart—naught but the sheen
Of brass-ware, and the crowd that thronged again
The market, babbling of the marriage-train.
'Twas but some moments more—and the bazaar
Vanished again—upon an ivory car
He sits, the enchanting lady by his side.
Lo, she is wreathed with roses like a bride!
Bright as Ayesha in the Courts of Day;
Pearled like a dewy lily in the ray
Of morning. Like the Shah's his kaftan white
Flames with a diamond, a deep fount of light,
A Sultan's ransom; forth in state they ride
Midst cheers that surge around them like a tide,
Drawn by a gold-and-crimson-harnessed span
Of cream-white horses, (such at Ispahan
Speeds the Shah prayer-ward on great days of state):
So move they proudly to their blissful fate;

Flowers rain upon them and their coursers' feet
Stamp cloth of gold, as down the echoing street
They press unto their nuptials—till a band
With him, The Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand,
Fronts them with challenge; straight a conflict grows—
The prince hath claimed the bride—tumult and blows
Bring blood and death:—Now Selim wounded lies,
His bride and jewel both the prince's prize.



GAIN the vision changed; his memory fought
Against oblivion, for his mind was wrought
Still with his finger-ache! Then she again
Is with him on a wild storm-wasted plain.

A ponderous iron mace he grasps in hand;
Forth like the mighty Rustem doth he stand,
Sheathed in full mail; to a tremendous round
Of burnished brass his aching arm is bound;
A company of leprous devils shout
Against him; and amidst that evil rout,
Two Sheitans, fierce and terrible to view
As the White Demon god-like Rustem slew.

BUT the sweet lady, she has naught of fear,—
She loves him; to his wounded hand draws near
And kisses it; then the Sheitans howl in scorn;
While he, alike with love and passion torn,
Rushes, deep cursing, at the hideous pair,
And closing on them heaves his mace in air.

WHEN suddenly he woke—the finger's pain
Stung him awake—now in his stall again,
A poor brass-worker, his bright vision flown,
Unloved, ignoble, scorned, reviled, alone.
A laughing, jeering crowd around him kept,
For he had moved and muttered as he slept;
And lo! amidst the laughter loud and long,
The slime-tongued merchant, foremost of the throng,
Faced him: "O Selim, your brave dreams must spin
From poppy-head, or some old potent bin
Of purple Shiraz! Those who hashish eat
Like fakirs play thus to the crowded street
More strange adventures than were ever sung
By great Firdusi of the silver tongue."
Then pausing, while the brutal mirth ran high,
And Selim, too bewildered to reply—
"I, too, can dream, though scarce of lady's lips.

And battle, but of merchandise and ships ;
For, while in sleep I rested this mid-day,
I dreamed that Selim came and heard him say,
'Here, take thy perfume-holder—I would feast ;
Bring forth thy bezants, be thy name increased ;
Or sell to Marco, if so be thy will,
To profit thee and me ; I'll drink my fill
Of pleasure ; let me flourish and be gay
And kiss the maid that I have won to-day.'
Here sits my Selim mooning in his booth ;
Say, has my vision spoken aught but truth ?"
Said Selim : "All I sell is in your view,
I have no perfume-holder here for you."
The knavish merchant made him this repeat,
With crafty leading, to the crowded street.
Yet once more he began—"But dreams are sent
From Allah." "Some, not yours"—then Selim bent
His eye full on him, "I have these to sell,
If so that you would purchase it is well,
You shall have value just and good ; I need
Money to-morrow ; be the price agreed.
Or if my wares you want not, pray you cease
And leave me, in the Name of Whom be Peace."
Then did the merchant buy of Selim's art
Some pieces, lothful with his coin to part ;

And took his leave, while Selim, richer grown
By a few silver coins, did little own
For merchandise, save what discarded lay,
The unfinished lantern Now he worked away
Fiercely upon it, that his wearied thought
Might cease its whispering, and Time be brought
To mend his pace. So, till the market gate
Was ready to be closed, he lingered late
At labor; rising then with anxious care
He fastened tight the little shutters where
The treasured gift, his pride and solace stood;
Then paced the unfriendly street in restless mood.



HAT night ill-boding dreams without surcease
Assailed his spirit, crucified his peace.
That one short night seemed fraught with
danger more

Than all the hundred nights that went before
While he his treasure in the chest had kept
In that deserted market-place. He slept
Fitfully, briefly, now that once he knew
A bad man lusted for it; then he threw
His clothes upon him; wandered up and down
The winding streets and alleys of the town,

Still ever passing where his treasure lay
Behind the palisades which barred the way
To the brass-worker's moonlit, still bazaar.
Up raced the savage watch-dogs barking war,
Leaped at the gate which held twixt them and him
As though they fain had torn him limb from limb.
A watchman with his lantern, on his rounds,
Drew near, attracted by the clamoring hounds,
Saw Selim, knew him, and passed elsewhere;
While he, with bodeful brow, kept gazing there
Between the bars, where one long shadow fell
Across his shop—a lonely sentinel.
Thus aimlessly until the dawn of day
He wore the weary hours of night away.



CARCE did the market open than his door
He opened too; then hammered as before
At the half-finished lantern; next took down
The perfume-holder, wrapped it, that the town
Might not view what he carried; then returned
All quickly home. With what the brass-ware earned
He clothed himself in festival array
As though it were for some high holiday;
Tied with deft hand the perfume-holder, too,

Within a broidered silk of creamy hue,
Wherein he placed a scented billet writ
In flowing verses when some rhyming fit
Had seized his spirit in the silent night;
This a caligrapher did fairly write,
With many a courteous phrase of love profound;
And various woven flowers the border bound.



BEHOLD the eager Selim as he stands,
The perfume-holder lifted in his hands,
Apparelled fair, ready to play his part
Of service to the mistress of his heart.
The full fine head-cloth of white hand-wove stuff,
Broidered with glimmering gold and threads of buff,
About a cone of yellow camlet winds;
Below, a snow-white linen skull-cap binds
With narrow line his temples, showing fair
Above his bronzed face and coal-black hair;
His head is straight, symmetric, small of size,
As of a steed alert, and his dark eyes
Are lustrous like a steed's; an eager grace
Plays in the outlines of his mobile face;
The lips are proudly set, the nostrils fine,
The features delicate and aquiline;

His tunic like the turban white, each fold
Of linen with its waving lines of gold;
A knife-case in the silken shawl is placed
Whose graceful folds wind round his slender waist;
From far Cashmere to Shiraz shall you see
No statelier, no braver youth than he.





HE messenger he gained for his emprise
Was an old woman, good, discreet, and wise;
But ask not of the look on Selim's face
As in her hands the love-gift he did place,
Or while he watched her dragging steps depart
To her, the sovereign of young Selim's heart!
He stood in trance while heart and visage burned,
Waiting until the ancient dame returned.



LOVE, thou pole-star of all souls—proud dream
Of bliss! dread ruler, passionate and extreme!
In thy closed hand are wealth, fame, life, and
death;
Self at thy heart, self-sacrifice thy breath;
The clown thou makest king, the king a clown;
Thou turnest cowards brave, and with thy frown

The man of blood is quelled; yea, even the clutch
Of avarice groping for the overmuch
Yields to thy smile and to thy promise sweet
Strews its blood-sweated bezants at thy feet;
But when a heart like Selim's owns thy power
He is all slave, all votary from that hour!

E stood and waited; years it seemed went by;
The glare of mid-day paled across the sky;
The hum of distant traffic ebbed away,
And o'er the hills the flame-born god of day
Seemed to halt yearningly ere, passed from sight,
He left the lovely city to the night.
Selim stood, waited;—back she came at last;
There was no need to question her, he cast
One look between her hands where she did lift
Trembling to meet his gaze the unopened gift,
Saying, "The lady by the Shah's command
Is wed—The Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand!"

HE words struck Selim speechless, he had known
One joy in life, a dream, his, his alone,
And he had drank it with a royal art,
Like Jamshid, till the wakening stung his heart;

His head fell forward, for some breathless space
The blow was deathening; ghastly white in face
He tottered toward the door like one in years,
Borne down with grief that scorched the fount of tears.
Grasping convulsively the brazen jar,
He found himself again in the bazaar,
The while with quivering lips, distractedly,
He muttered texts of old philosophy,
Groping for consolation, but no heed
Could give them—ah, how often in our need,
When earth is black beneath the blackened skies,
They fail, those deep proud sayings of the wise!



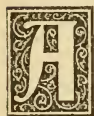
ET through his agony was woven a tune
Of words that clogged his tongue—as 'twere
some rune
Hammering its dreadful rhythm through his
brain—

And mingled with his bitter draught of pain:

*"The Cup of Life with wine or wormwood flows,
The Leaves of Life keep falling, and the Rose
Whether at Babylon or at Naishàpùr,
Fades, and her garden mate unheeding blows."*





THESE were the words of one in Selim's town,
Gone long before, a sage of wide renown,
Who learned the mystic law that moves the stars,
But yet whose soul, foiled at life's prison bars,
Testing the hollowness of earthly state,
Mocked sadly at irrevocable fate;
And, spite of fame and power by learning won,
Re-wrote the olden tale of Solomon,
Chanting the hopeless burden o'er again,
" 'Tis vain—the life we live, like death, is vain!"




AND Selim turned to work, because he felt
His reason totter as he slowly spelt
The branding of the blow upon his soul;
In work, unceasing work, he might control
The anguish of his heart, and so—vain, vain
The miserable days that must remain!
He had forgot or had not cared to change
His holiday vestments; down the sun-baked range
Of the bazaar the whole brass-working tribe
Broke forth upon him with loud laugh and gibe
That bit not like the fangs of anguish grim,
Yet like a swarm of gnats they worried him.
Yearning to be alone, his soul was wronged

As round his path the coarse mechanics thronged
With mock obeisance, gestures rude, uncouth,
Jeering, as they pursued them to his booth—
For little love they bore him. “Taunt him well!
Is he not Selim the Unsociable,
Too proud to mingle with his equals?” There
They crowded close to see how he would stare—
For a dire chance had happened him: thus he,
Unto his small store staggered heavily.

 IS booth was plundered; all his wares were gone!
Far worse—his tools! He could not think upon
Their loss. Their value was not great, but dear
Almost as were his fingers; misery drear
Drifted across him; only now remained
The unfinished lantern, but deformed and stained,
As though the plunderer held its value light
And with his heel had crushed it out of spite.

 LONG time he sat, there in his little shop,
Still as an image of stone, his head a-prop
Upon his hands, a ruined man, bereft
Of all he held most dear. To him was left,

When he a little cleared his mind to think,
(His cup filled full, with madness at the brink),
Only the gift returned which he still held,
The perfume-holder; now is he compelled
To purchase bread and tools; now must he go
And from the merchant buy a lease of woe.

 LINDNESS and deafness fell on eye and ear,
Confounding all, nor grew his sense more clear
As he went stumbling to the merchant's stand,
The empty pledge of his false hope in hand.
The place of sale with merchandise was rich;
Fine armor blazed from bracket, hook, and niche;
Sabres from Samarcand and costly shawls
From Indian looms were hanging on the walls;
And Orient ivories, carvings from the Isles
Within their lacquered cabinets stood in files.
The shelves were heaped with stuffs of rich brocade;
Mirrors of steel with silver frames inlaid
With jewels, glittering daggers, hookahs fine,
And all the costly wares of Levantine
And Indian markets crowded all the space.
As Selim gazed in wonder round the place
Coarse faces covered him with leering scan,

Fit tools of service to the sordid man
Whose slaves they were, and downcast Selim felt
The transient courage he had groped for melt
Whole from his heart; his one despairing thought
Sowed desolation; things against him wrought
In foul conspiracy. The merchant now
Began with lowering and contemptuous brow
To underprice, to scorn, to villify,
What he had been so eager once to buy.
Then asking Selim what his need might be,
He told him he would take for surety
The brazen jar and lend him; sadly then
Said Selim, "I need brass and tools again
To carry on my trade." The merchant's smile
Changed to a cold and stealthy look of guile
As forth he brought a well-assorted pack
Of half-worn tools; but Selim started back,
Then clutched—the things were his! Faintness did seize
Upon him, he felt his very life-blood freeze
And shrivel; distant, indistinct, and small,
Looked all things round him; darkness seemed to fall
And deathly coldness, blotting earth and sky,
As though the wing of Asrael brushed him by.
Suddenly loomed the merchant's hateful face
Close o'er his own, in horrible grimace;

Forth sprang two monstrous hands that straightway lay
Grasp on his brazen treasure and away
Bore it in triumph to a distant shelf;
Then rushed the hot fit on—he flung himself
In rage against the servants—wildly fought—
Until his mind some little space was brought
To hear men's voices dwindling through the dim,
From faces that he knew; these said of him
“Such master work as this is, cannot be
That foolish Selim's;” sure were these that he
Wrought nothing of the kind; they knew him well
And all his work; he yesterday did tell
He owned not such a thing; and as he strove,
Struggling to right himself, they dragged and drove
Him forth, and nothing but a whirl was there
Of dust and pressure, anger, and despair;
Blows rained upon him; one last cruel stroke
Brought blood—he fell—and then his spirit broke!

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HE who had been to one unhappy heart
The lode-star of its being, sat apart
In the zenana's curtained privacy,
A married captive, never to be free.

But o'er The Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand
Some time she ruled; the heart she could command
Of that fierce fighter in his pleasant mood:
A second wife in sovereign solitude,
All gave her homage, all her triumph graced,
Even she, the first wife, whom she had displaced.



HE Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand at first
Was courteous and devoted, but he nursed
Higher ambition than in flowers to bind
His spirit to service of one girlish mind
However enchanting, for his heart was set
On deeds of violence; he could ne'er forget
The feud, the blood-lust that was his from birth.
He was a bold, intrepid son of earth,
A graceful tiger in a leash of silk,
As mild and pleasant as the coco's milk
Till call for action came;—a lion-hunt,
In which he scorned the danger, chose the brunt,
Or vision of booty and some vengeful raid
Into Afghanistan, more often swayed
The councils of his heart, than any charms
He found within the circle of her arms.
And she, poor lonely discontented dove,

Brooded on this, and dreamed had she through love
Been so far favored in her lot, to fall
Unto that heart where she was all in all—
However lowly, howso'er distressed
By circumstance, by poverty oppressed—
Life had been happier even with such an one,
Than that now passed with this proud monarch's son.
She was unlike the frivolous, tranquil crew
Who chattered round about her; often grew
Intolerable to her vivacious mind
The still zenana—health and spirit pined.
But came distress far greater when, one day,
Returning from some distant, wide foray
Into Afghanistan, her husband brought
A captive home, who now held all his thought.
The superseded wife grew languid, pale;
Till, part by some new thought to countervail
Her long depression, part, that she consult
A famed astrologer, whose art occult
In all that region was most noted, they
Who lived about her counselled her one day,
She should a few leagues' distant journey take,
The drear monotony of her life to break,
Beyond the turquoise hills and level land
That fringed the province with its shifting sand.



POOR lonely star of one lone heart! the love
Her heart still yearned for like that heaven
above
The Frankish women sought—she had not
dreamed

That it had crossed her; its pale radiance gleamed,
A heavenly vision through her falling tears,
Fairer as loomed the vista of the years!
Bravely again she took life's burden up.
Hope flowered once more; she had not drained the cup
Of bitter vintage to its turbid lees.
She and her escort started as the breeze
Of early evening swept the fragrant glades
And waved the banners o'er long colonnades,
Ruffled the citron blooms and filled the air
With cool perfume and freshness everywhere;
Bathed with its dews the earth and purged the sky;
Soothed the hot valleys with its wandering sigh;
Fluttered the folds of shawls and turbans loose
And froliced in the billowy white burnous;
The languid city fanned with healing breath—
Ay, even awoke the pulse benumbed of death.





ERVANTS and slaves upon the camels laid
The tents and baggage; others were arrayed
To take the journey, sitting on the packs
Lashed either side or on the mounded backs;
And, as a guard, to rearward and before
Some twenty warriors on white camels bore
Lances or muskets, and each hump around
Bright shawls and broidered saddle-cloths were bound.



FROM out the gate the ordered camels passed:
They left the hills behind—then travelled fast
Across the waste, whose open length was soon
O'er lanterned by the lemon-colored moon.
The guards from time to time their challenge sent
To plodding footmen on their passage bent
Unto the city; who when questioned said
"We are but home-bound miners;" some they stayed,
The last of these some moments; at demand
Why they were journeying in that lonely land,
These answered humbly, they had carried out
Into the distant desert thereabout
A corpse; 'twas of a man who, raving mad,
Had died in prison; this of what it had
Of worth they'd stripped; lo, now but from their toil,

With their sad recompense of wretched spoil.
The captain forward turned his camel's head
And told his lady what these men had said.

AUGHT further marked their travel; all next day
They camped; at evening took again their way;
And when at length arose the second sun
They left the desert, their long journey done;
And to the village straight their lady brought
Where dwelt the famed astrologer she sought.

HE gifts bestowed, with courtesies exchanged,
A visit for the lady was arranged
To the mysterious man. His house was small
And undistinguished; but within the wall
Was a rich room where he received his guest;
There hung a time-piece with quaint signs impressed;
An astrolabe with Chaldic figures stood
Which told of wandering stars each varying mood,
Wrought in Egyptian land; a conjurer's crook
Leaned on a table; in a crypt-like nook
Lay yellow parchments piled. The languid wife

Wistfully eyed the man of learned life;
A sage sedate, a form of mark and note
In Iran, where the beggar's frowzy coat
Clothes often king-like men; his tall black cap
And ample flowing robe of camlet nap
Were of the finest, and his brow and eye
Majestic; for through gazing on the sky
And pondering deeply o'er its mystic lore
He much of its sublime expression wore.
Full to the waist, wide down the massive chest,
His sable beard swept o'er his saffron vest,
Lending grave dignity and benignant grace,
Softening the stern lines of his thoughtful face.
There stands a proverb long in Eastern ken,
That "no men should wear beards but Persian men."



HE sad-faced lady come to seek his aid,
Took courage as his features she surveyed.
Calm, courteous, wise, he seemed; she told him
all

Was needful to the purpose; voiced the thrall
And endless hunger of her heart, and, too,
Briefly her history; for she saw he knew
Much of the strivings of tried souls; yes, he

Was deeply schooled in the philosophy
And poetry of Iran and the East.
He soothed her famished spirit with a feast
Of well-culled verses, wrought for counsel by
Strong hearts to comfort life's extremity,
Down from the words of Solomon the Wise
To the star-gazer poet, who now lies
In her own city in unchanging rest,
The clods and burial stones across his breast.



HE words of counsel past, ere she her way
Took thence, he told her he, the following day,
The issue of his searchings of the night
Would send her. She too watched the twinkling
light

Of stars, that through the heavens unswerving kept
Their doomful path. Beneath them mortals slept
As though no seeds of fate within them lay.
Keepers of how many secrets they
Of human lives, revealers of how few,
Though their eternal witness fronts our view!
Alas, they did not to her soul impart
That one had called her "Star-of-Selim's-Heart."



EXT morn in scented silk the missive came:
"TO the Most High and Honorable Dame,
Moon to the Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand,
Fairest of all the fair of Persian land!

*In name of Allah whom the faithful call
The Merciful, Victorious, Chief of All:
The Stars, O Lady, speak the truth, tho' man
Not always may their mystic answer scan;
Thrice have I read to-night the face of Heaven
And thrice to me this answer hath been given,
These silent words of fate and mystery:
'A FLIGHT OF RAVENS!'*

*May it rest with thee,
O Lady, to interpret them aright,
And may they throw upon thy darkness light
According to thy heart; and may the peace
Of Allah, who alone gives souls increase,
Be shown to Thee. This is the prayer devout
Of him, the unworthiest of thy servants; doubt
Not He will send thee grace.*

*Written by the hand
Of Hassan of the Astrolabe, to command."*



HE, bearing these words with her, now began
Her homeward journey, pondering; still ran
Her thoughts along one line; her mind was bent
Upon the answer of the stars, that went
Ever before her like a vision blest,
Guiding her to her solace and her quest.




T was the chill and silent time of night
Before the rose-crowned, pearly-vestured Light
Loops joyance round the world; mysterious hour.
When Azrael comes with all his awful power
To loose the souls of men and women old
From their worn bodies, and in numbing fold
The fluttering spirit wraps and bears away
To realms of utter midnight or of day.



HE camel-train paced slowly; rose the dust
As each broad foot into the sand was thrust,
And fell again full quickly, beaten down
By the damp air; a distant eastward frown
Against the sky betokened hills; the sun
Beyond the shade-land soon prepared to run
His course; the watchful guards from time to time

Turned in their saddles to behold him climb
The hill-tops; o'er the desert's lonely gray
Paling for leagues beyond, the film of day
Pressed a faint outline; an uneven spur,
Dimly defined against the mist-like blur,
Breaking the outline, showed them Naishàpùr.

S the broad sun flamed o'er the hills again,
Startled by that or by the camel-train,
A clamorous flight of birds upon one hand
Trailed from some object on the distant sand.
The lady, resting in uneasy sleep,
Awoke as o'er her swished the bustling sweep
Of wings, and from her litter watched them float,
Ominous and black, against the heaven remote,
New-lighted by the half-way risen sun,
Which o'er the pallid sky his splendor spun.
Flush to her mind, as from the written page,
There rushed the words of the star-gazing sage,—
“A flight of ravens;” straight she waved her hand
And gave the captain of the train command
She must at once be carried to the place
Whence rose the birds of omen; with ill grace
He turned to do her will, for now would day

The naked desert scourge with burning ray.
The slow procession wheeled, the distance spanned,—
And lo, a skeleton bleaching on the sand!

“**O** FAIREST lady,” cried the chief in tones
Sore vexed, “Let Allah hear me; ’tis but bones
Of some wayfarer, slain or gone astray
Here in the desert; others for a prey
Than these same birds have found him; doth abide
With him no coin, nor weapon at his side.”

“**I**N name of Allah, Merciful and Just,
Some of you men dismount and straightway
thrust
Around him; search each bit of cloth and bone
And see if aught about him may be known.”

UNWILLINGLY, and cursing the delay
Among themselves, they slowly did obey.
They lifted with their spears each ragged clout,
And with their muskets shoved the bones about.

“**N**OTHING, fair lady, nothing,” cried the chief,
Climbing across his saddle with relief;
Then set the train in motion, well content
To quit their tarrying. Soon thereafter went
Unto the litter one who lingered late.
No word he said, but with a smile sedate
Handed his lady a sere, tiny thing
Of white and yellow bone. Round it a ring
Or shred of brass, tight-twisted, bore along
Each edge, at intervals, impression strong,
Irregular, a little whorl, which she
Caught at as from the man of mystery.
She placed it in the hollow of her hand
And gazed and gazed, till in the slender band
Of brass she knew the token—yes, the day
That she on Selim’s finger in her play
Had twisted it! again the constant gaze
Which searched her footsteps through the market ways;
Again the dream, the hope, the flushed surprise
That starred with love those dark and thoughtful eyes.

CO this, then, he had come! Ay, well,—alas!
She knew the tiny pattern on the brass,
And all in tears she scanned it; he had said,
She now remembered—in his little shed—

He, poor dead Selim, her lone worshipper,—
The tool that made it, save on gift for her,
Should not be used; yes, he whose bones now lie
Strewing the sand, beneath the pitiless sky,
All save this one, this small ringed finger bone,
Relic of sacred love, hers, hers alone!
The one cold token of the constant flame
That burned within his breast. O hour of shame!
This dry white bone reproached her! Witness now
Poor dumb starved heart the fervor of her vow!
Witness her tears and kisses and her head
Bent o'er this voiceless pleader for the dead,
Laid now upon her soft grief-burdened breast,
There, while that heart should beat with life, to rest.



HE lusty sun stared fiercely, free and high,
When they had reached the city. The blue sky
Shone dazzling clear, save where some fine-
combed clouds
Straggled across; as they were souls in shrouds
Speeding to heaven; or travellers single-file,
Moving apart, as though in fear of guile,
Wrapping their parching bodies from the glare
And dusty highway. The zenana's air
Unto The Star-of-Selim's-Heart was cool

And comforting, as, fresh from out the pool
Of perfumed water on the rich divan
She lay, and o'er her waved an Indian fan
Held by a favorite maid. The silken door
Opened, two little girls between them bore
A shrouded present, which by high command,
Her lord's, The Shadow-of-the-Sultan's-Hand,
On her return be given her. Listlessly
She loosed the first silk wrappings—paused—for she
Saw surely 'twas some growth of royal art,
Even such a love-work as some loyal heart
Like Selim's might have pledged her. She unwound
The silk with wakened care, in thought profound.
Oh, miracle of genius proud and pure!
He promised her such a gift; alas! how poor
The man who loved her was; she had not cared
For him or his—ah, heaven, had he been spared!
Selim's own self this wonder might have wrought—
Selim's sweet self, had he not come to naught.
It wronged, insulted him; for daily need
Had bound that hand from such a lavish deed.
Faint murmurings were thronging in her ears;
She watched it glimmering through her mist of tears;
Seen midst them, the entrancing, matchless thing
Loomed indistinct, gigantic, wavering.

AS her tears fell she wiped them fast away;
Then seeing more clearly, something bade her
lay

Grasp on the brazen vessel, while her gaze
Grew fixed, grew all excitement, all amaze;
Then "gainst her breast she strained it with a sob;
And as her heart, rallying with mighty throb,
Shook deep her being all her loosened hair
Enshrined the perfume-holder like a prayer.
There—there—deep-graved the proof of matchless love!
Each scrolled and burnished strip of brass above,
Upon each ornamental fillet's round,
The same fine-patterned tiny whorl was found!
The same with which his finger, once, she bruised
And fastened—from the die herself had used!

YES, Selim's gift had come to her—his love
Had found her after death; ay, there above,
Even in the distant realms of bliss, new cheer
Must come to him; had she not grown more near
Unto his spirit though his outcast bones
Lay whitening on the desert's sands and stones—
All save this finger token? But there—look!
Graved on the brass his words, the open book

Of Selim's love—the words he never said
In life—his faithful message from the dead!

*"Dove of my soul, thou white and wondrous dove,
My Heaven is with thee, nor did Allah's love
Ever send Peri unto suffering earth
Fair as thou art, O lily of fragrant birth!
Star of love's sky, rise pure and dwell apart
To sanctify the flower-land of my heart.
Behold the first fruits of my pledge to thee;
Queen of my dreams, be merciful to me."*



HAT evening, from the spot the camel-train
Had halted on when day broke o'er the plain,
Saw the same sun, soft-barred with roseate
streaks,

Dying away between the western peaks;
And as he sank from view the low sweet breath
Of twilight sighed above the day-god's death,
But swelled at night and through the star-lit space
A requiem swayed across the desert's face;
And as it wailed its dreary, weird refrain
Along the hills and o'er the barren plain,
Cast heavy handfuls of soft sand where lay

A dead man's bones—and when the eye of day
Searched for them, lo, the desert held its trust,
Folded forever in its shroud of dust.

AND in the night that breeze with plaintive sigh
Breathed through the lonely latticed turret high
That pinnaced a palace; wandering there,
Entered a dim-lit chamber, strewing rare
Spiced odors forth along the midnight air
From a brass perfume-holder—such sweet breath
As rises scarcely at a monarch's death.

AND in that silence a pale, tearful-eyed
Woman inhaled the perfume—watched it glide
Toward the desert; on her heaving breast
One trembling hand she laid; beneath it pressed
A silken case, which hid a little bone
And shred of hammered brass . . .
No more is known.

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